

Recognizing Main Idea and Details

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

topic: what a piece of nonfiction writing talks about; its subject matter

main idea: the most important idea in a paragraph

topic sentence: a sentence that states the main idea of a paragraph

supporting details: words, phrases, or sentences that tell more about the main idea or topic sentence. Types of supporting details include:
examples: specific instances that explain or support a point
sensory details: details that appeal to one or more of the five senses
reasons: details that tell why an opinion is valid or an event occurs
facts: statements that can be proved
statistics: facts expressed in numbers

HERE'S HOW

Step 1: Identify the topic. Ask yourself: What is the paragraph about?

Step 2: Think about the main idea. Ask yourself: What is the gist of the paragraph? What important idea does the writer want to express?

Step 3: Look for a topic sentence. The topic sentence is usually either the first or last sentence in a paragraph. It can occur anywhere. In some paragraphs, the main idea is not stated directly, but a general thread is implied by the supporting details.

Step 4: Identify the supporting details. Writers use different types of details to support different ideas. What types are used depends on the purpose and the main idea. For example, reasons persuade, facts and statistics explain, sensory details describe, and examples illustrate.

Step 5: Use a graphic organizer. A chart such as the one below can help you take notes on the main idea and supporting details in a paragraph.

EXAMPLE: MAIN IDEA AND SUPPORTING DETAILS

Main Idea: <i>Everyone should study some sort of music.</i>			
Supporting Detail: <i>Even if learning an instrument is not possible, everyone can dance and sing.</i>	Supporting Detail: <i>Music is a universal language, understood around the globe.</i>	Supporting Detail: <i>Musical learning takes practice and develops discipline.</i>	Supporting Detail: <i>Music expresses deep feelings—joy and sorrow, and can help relieve stress.</i>